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# Soviet first-strike capability played down

Washington (Reuter) — U.S. monitoring of Soviet missile tests has shown that Moscow's nuclear arsenal is not nearly accurate or reliable enough to destroy American missile silos in a first strike, U.S. intelligence sources said yesterday.

Contradicting the Reagan administration's case for building costly MX missiles, the sources told Reuter the monitoring showed that Soviet missiles would not be able to wipe out the existing U.S. Minuteman force in the foreseeable future.

A source who has access to and has evaluated the top-secret test data said: "Their accuracy isn't even within the ballpark of being able to launch a first strike against our Minuteman missile silos, not even with their large, powerful warheads."

One of the top private weapons experts, Kosta Tsipis of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, told Reuter he is about to issue a study that also concludes the Pentagon has greatly exaggerated Soviet missile accuracy.

President Reagan and the Pentagon have warned repeatedly of a "window of vulnerability" that would allow the Kremlin to launch a first strike with highly accurate intercontinental ballistic missiles, destroying U.S. ICBMs in their silos.

Mr. Reagan maintains the controversial \$40 billion MX is needed to match Soviet ICBM accuracy, but he has been unable for two years to find a deployment mode acceptable to Congress and the military to protect the missiles from a first strike.

A source familiar with the Soviet test data said it casts doubt on the need for the MX.

He said the data on all tests since 1978 of SS-18 and SS-19 missiles, the most advanced Soviet ICBMs, had been gathered by U.S. satellites and ground stations that tracked the missiles, some of which were fired from a site in the Soviet Union north of Iran to Kamchatka, Siberia.

Although the precise Soviet targets were not known, he said, intelligence monitoring of their missile telemetry (radio guidance) systems showed the missiles "wobbled" excessively and were too inaccurate to hit close enough to U.S. silos to destroy the Minuteman missiles.

He said Soviet missile accuracy was not likely to improve dramatically in the foreseeable future.

Mr. Tsipis said his study, based on public data, concluded that the Pentagon has stated Soviet missile accuracy to be six times better than it actually is.

A Pentagon spokesman, asked to

comment on the doubts raised by Mr. Tsipis and the intelligence sources about Soviet missile accuracy, said: "The newest version of the Soviet SS-18 is more accurate than our most accurate ICBMs [and] the Soviets today have the potential to launch a first strike."

But a source familiar with the test data said Soviet missiles were probably even less accurate than the data show.

He said this was due to a phenomenon known as "bias" — the effects of gravitational fields, snow, rain, and wind in the North Pole region, over which the missiles would be fired in an actual attack on the United States.

There have been no test firings over the pole and the bias factor could throw a number of missiles off course, denying Soviet military planners the certainty they would require to contemplate a first strike, the source said.

Soviet missiles are made even more unreliable by their dependence on liquid fuel, which is volatile and corrodes delicate electrical circuitry, increasing the likelihood of fouled launches, the source said.

He said U.S. missiles also suffer from numerous electrical problems that can make them unreliable and that tests from operational American silos have been "disastrous."

Four such tests were conducted between 1966 and 1968 and all failed, he said, adding that three of the missiles used never left their silos, because of electrical problems, and the fourth had to be destroyed in flight.

After 1968, the source said, U.S. ICBM test launches took place under carefully controlled and less realistic conditions at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. He said he had analyzed all the Vandenberg tests of Titan and Minuteman missiles and found the accuracy was "less than overwhelming" despite the controlled conditions.

Despite problems of missile reliability and accuracy, he said, enough of the missiles of each superpower would work to be able to devastate the population centers of the other side.

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